

Atheism, Moral Psychology, and the Deus Non Vocatus in Early Alcoholics Anonymous

A Non-Theistic / Atheistic Way Of Working The Twelve Steps: William E. Swegan

by Glenn F. Chesnut

William E. Swegan (Sgt. Bill), in *The Psychology of Alcoholism*, Chapter 18, "Recovery through the Twelve Steps," explains how some early AA's (like himself in the 1940's and 50's) successfully worked the steps from the standpoint of a truly dedicated ethical humanism.

STEP 2. "CAME TO BELIEVE THAT A POWER GREATER THAN OURSELVES COULD RESTORE US TO SANITY."

Bill Swegan's Higher Power here is the laws of nature, the healing forces within nature which can return our minds to sanity and reason, and the very rationalistic idea of the power of truth and honesty which gives us the power of understanding other people with more compassion for their differing points of view.

"I cannot fight universal laws and principles and succeed. The basis of these principles is all-powerful, and everything in the universe is subject to them Some who come into the twelve step program object that if something cannot be touched or felt,

it cannot exist. The law of gravity also cannot be touched or felt. But no human being can throw a baseball up into the air so hard that it will float up there in the air and never come spinning back down. As a baseball player, I had to learn how to throw a baseball with the right velocity to make it come down at the right place and the right level, and this required learning to work with the law of gravity instead of thinking I could just ignore that rule of nature. We are surrounded by powers and forces greater than ourselves at all times."

"The power we are searching for here cannot be touched or felt directly, but it is a Healing Power which is capable of restoring our sanity, which we can see at work in the lives of those who have already been working the twelve step program. It is the power of truth and honesty itself, but it is also the power of compassion and understanding. If this step is carried out properly, those who work it first begin to incorporate within their internal makeup the positive feeling that they are not alone any more. Fear then begins to subside."

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STEP 3. "MADE A DECISION TO TURN OUR WILL AND OUR LIVES OVER TO THE CARE OF GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD HIM."

"We must notice the phrase 'as we understood Him,' which means that if traditional religious language makes no sense to me, I am free to think of this Healing Power of truth, honesty, compassion, and personal transformation in ways that do make sense to me. Even now, well over fifty years after I first got sober, I do not feel comfortable with heavily religious language, because I still do not understand it (even though I gladly allow those in the program who do understand it to talk about their higher power in that way). You will notice that when I first came into the A.A. program, my own spirituality centered around the spirit of helping and caring for others and saving human lives, which I used to replace my old spirit of egocentrism, anger, and selfishness. That simple decision (another key word which appears in this step) allowed me to get sober and stay sober, and begin living harmoniously with the universal principles of nature."

STEP 5. "ADMITTED TO GOD, TO OURSELVES, AND TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING THE EXACT NATURE OF OUR WRONGS."

In his discussion of this step, Bill Swegan completely omits any reference to God, and it is also not described by him as a "confession" in the more religious sense of that word. Instead, his principal emphasis is upon restoring positive communications with other members of our families, especially when we are feeling extremely guilty about the harm we did to them while we were drinking.

"It is an arduous task indeed to establish positive communications with another person when I have in fact been feeling guilty about the harm I caused that other person. But defective communications cause continual frustrations, and are the

source of continuing conflicts, particularly in the immediate family. It is traumatic for alcoholics to talk over some of the events in which they have been involved with their own families. Some alcoholics seek a 'geographical cure' by walking out and fleeing from their families, rather than attempt a positive resolution of the differences which exist in their homes. The hurt done by fleeing becomes more acute, the closer the ties are in the family."

STEP 6. "WERE ENTIRELY READY TO HAVE GOD REMOVE ALL THESE DEFECTS OF CHARACTER."

On the surface, Bill Swegan sounds more religious here than in his discussion of any of the other steps, but we need to remember that when he speaks of "coming to terms with the power of God, as we understand Him," he means the laws of nature, the healing forces of nature, and the very rationalistic idea of the power of truth and honesty to restore our minds to sanity and reason.

STEP 7. "HUMBLY ASKED HIM TO REMOVE OUR SHORTCOMINGS."

In Bill Swegan's discussion here, he does not talk about asking God for anything. What he does do is to recommend that we practice humility, which he describes in rationalistic terms as "the willingness to learn."

STEP 11. "SOUGHT THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO IMPROVE OUR CONSCIOUS CONTACT WITH GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD HIM, PRAYING ONLY FOR KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WILL FOR US AND THE POWER TO CARRY THAT OUT."

The key phrase here is Bill's statement that "It seems easier for alcoholics and addicts to fight God than to fight their illness." His central message here is that we need to quit fussing about religion all the time, and start working on fixing what is wrong with our alcoholic minds, which is what is

causing us all our real troubles.

Bill's Higher Power here is not a personal God figure, but a set of "spiritual concepts," that is (for him at any rate) the laws of nature, the principles of reason, and so on. We need to meditate and think about the importance of learning to trust that there are logical solutions to all of our truly important problems.

But even more important, "faith and trust in oneself is ... essential to progress in the program." As an alcoholic, I have all too often come to believe that my life is doomed, that I will never find happiness or any kind of a good life, and that it is pointless to try to act logically and responsibly because "the world is against me" or "God is against me" -- when the REAL PROBLEM is that I have lost faith and trust in myself. All too many alcoholics feel "programmed for failure," and plagued by continual self-sabotage, where every time they come to the brink of success, they are driven by some sick need to destroy everything.

So one of the most important keys to recovery for most alcoholics is to give them hope and restore their self-confidence. For Bill, effective daily meditation needs to include things like self-affirmations and continual re-affirmations that it is all right for me to be successful and to feel good about myself.

CONCLUSION

Nothing in all of this is incompatible with belief in a loving personal God who always takes care of me and will never let me or my family come to any hurt or harm, and Bill Swegan never attacks people who want to believe that.

But he does insist that I do not have to believe that in order to work the program successfully, get sober, and find true serenity and a good life.

When his mother died when he was a small child, when the bombs were dropping on him and his best friends at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and at a number of other times in his life, Bill Swegan did not believe that it was rational or realistic to believe in a supernatural power who would guarantee that he and his loved ones would never die or be injured. He had learned better than that, at first hand.

And Bill's private observation to me was that people who claim to believe in a personal God and talk about that all the time, but who refuse to do a real fourth step or do the other things he is talking about here, never in fact end up feeling good or achieving any real serenity. They seem to spend all of their time obsessed with fear and resentment, and attacking other people and attempting to start needless quarrels with everyone around them.



Alternative Readings of "GOD"

in Alcoholics Anonymous

Individual members may have issues with any of the religious origins and customs within alcoholics anonymous. These may be because a pride to turn any such discussion into an intellectual exercise, or an argument the newcomer can manipulate. It may come from a neurotic need to defy all authority and authority figures, real or imagined. It may be because of previous experiences with individuals or groups who have used the traditional meanings to gain their own means, do damage or simply use a Religious guise for some personal abuse.

Many newcomers who have such problems may be relieved that such objections were easily overcome those who came before by turning GOD into an acronym. It has meant "Good Orderly Direction" for some. For others it was the "Group of Drunks" - the members in AA who had stayed sober when the newcomer could not. This substitution is mentioned on Page 107 of the book **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions**.

